



Toward a Multidimensional Framework for Grief

Introduction

Grief is most often understood through the narrow lens of bereavement: the emotional aftermath of losing someone we love. Yet contemporary research across psychology, trauma studies, anthropology, and moral philosophy makes clear that grief is a broader category of human experience, encompassing disruptions of identity, community, worldview, and coherence. Veterans, first responders, and trauma-exposed communities often carry multiple forms of grief at once, many of which are not socially acknowledged or clinically recognized. To work effectively with these populations, whether through narrative therapy, ritual design, or emerging digital tools like Poewell, we need a more complete map of grief's terrain. The following four-part framework offers a preliminary structure for understanding grief as a multidimensional domain, organized not by symptoms but by what has been lost: people, self, world, or clarity itself.

1. Grief From the Loss of People

This is the most familiar form of grief and includes bereavement, anticipatory grief, traumatic loss, ambiguous loss, and complicated grief. These experiences arise when a relationship changes, ends, or is ruptured. Individuals may grieve the person directly, the roles attached to that relationship, or the imagined futures that die with them.

Theme: the pain of losing, or preparing to lose, someone meaningful.

Traditional grief research lives here: attachment theory, meaning reconstruction, and modern bereavement science. Yet even this "classic" grief is not uniform. Ambiguity, trauma, suddenness, and social recognition all shape whether grief integrates or becomes prolonged.

2. Grief From the Loss of Self

Grief is not only interpersonal; it can also be intrapersonal, rooted in identity rupture. Veterans and first responders often carry moral injury, survival guilt, identity loss, and developmental or transitional grief. These experiences do not hinge on the death of another but on the perceived loss of one's own moral coherence, purpose, or self-understanding.

Theme: the pain of losing a part of who you are or who you believed yourself to be.

This area draws from moral psychology, trauma theology, narrative identity, and the emerging literature on moral injury. It is especially relevant for populations trained to act decisively under moral pressure, where the aftermath of action—or inaction—can fracture the self.

3. Grief From the Loss of Place, Community, or World

Grief also occurs when the broader world breaks: when safety, belonging, or cultural meaning collapses. Collective trauma, ecological grief, displacement, institutional betrayal, and disenfranchised grief fit here. These experiences often show up as diffuse sorrow, disorientation, alienation, or the sense that one's world is no longer intact.

Theme: the grief that arises when the world no longer feels familiar, safe, or whole.

This category combines sociology, environmental humanities, cultural trauma theory, and studies of institutional trust. It accounts for losses that are shared, systemic, or environmental rather than personal.

4. Grief From Unresolved or Unclear Loss

Some losses do not end cleanly. Ambiguous loss, long-term illness, caregiving for dementia or TBI, and unresolved separations create grief without closure. These experiences often resist traditional mourning because the loss is ongoing or indeterminate.

Theme: grief without edges or answers; ongoing, open-ended sorrow.

This domain is shaped by family systems theory, chronic illness studies, and Pauline Boss's foundational work on ambiguity. It captures grief that lacks the ritual clarity or social supports that bereavement typically receives.

Why a Multidimensional Framework Matters

Most existing clinical or community-based approaches treat these forms of grief separately, with different conceptual languages and different intervention models. Veterans, however, often carry multiple griefs simultaneously: a death in the field, a loss of moral identity, a rupture of trust in institutions, and ambiguous or unresolved losses tied to service. A multidimensional framework makes space for:

- grief that is unspoken or socially unrecognized
- grief tied to identity, purpose, and meaning
- grief experienced at the community or world level
- grief that resists closure or clear boundaries

It also aligns with what practitioners intuitively know: healing rarely follows a single pathway. People move between different forms of grief, sometimes in the same narrative, sometimes in the same breath.

Toward a New Domain of Study

Taken together, these four categories suggest the foundation for a formal domain we might call:

Multidimensional Grief and Meaning Reconstruction

or

The Integrative Study of Grief: Person, Self, World, and Ambiguity

This domain synthesizes thought leaders and traditions across bereavement theory, moral injury, cultural trauma, narrative identity, ecological grief, and ambiguous loss. It offers practitioners, scholars, and technologists a unified lens for understanding how individuals and communities metabolize rupture. For Poewell and the Sempergeist Institute, this framework provides the conceptual ground for designing emotionally responsive environments, rituals, and storytelling interventions that respect the complexity of human loss.

Conclusion

Grief is not a single experience but a constellation of losses: of people, of selves, of shared worlds, and of clarity itself. Veterans and first responders, accustomed to acting without hesitation and carrying emotional burdens privately, often confront several of these losses at once. By understanding grief across these four dimensions, we can design new pathways for healing that integrate art, ritual, community, and psychologically grounded technologies. This multidimensional approach lays the conceptual foundation for Poewell, for future research, and for a more honest public conversation about how people live with and grow through the many forms of loss that shape the human condition.

About the Author

Dr. Dennis Stevens is a U.S. Coast Guard veteran, visual artist, and educator with a Doctor of Education from Columbia University's Teachers College. He is the founder of the Sempergeist Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to healing through art, ritual, and storytelling. His current work centers on Poewell, a platform using generative AI to help people navigate grief and loss.

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